Saint Genevieve

of Paris

Mary Xenia Fagan

The Life of our Holy Mother among the Saints, Saint Genevieve of Paris (423-512 AD)

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whose memory is celebrated on January 3rd, according to the ecclesiastical calendar

Written and Illustrated by Mary Xenia Fagan

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Dedicated to my Goddaughters,

Irene & Genevieve

The life of Saint Genevieve began in the small French village of Nanterre, only four miles from Paris. In this village lived a pious couple, Severus and Gerontia,[1] who gave birth to the child Genevieve in the year 423. Although her parents were rich, they were hard working, and Genevieve tended her father's sheep from a young age. This was a difficult job, since the sheep would wander off, and get lost or injured if she were not very watchful.

The young shepherdess spent many long hours in the meadows with the sheep, and used this time to pray to God. She often thought of the shepherds in Bethlehem. These shepherds had been watchful on the night of the Lord's Nativity and had seen a vision of angels that proclaimed the Saviour's birth. Because of her piety, even before she had reached the age of seven, Saint Genevieve desired to serve and worship the Lord, as had those shepherds. Thus, even from her youth, her piety and devotion to God was noted by the townsfolk.

One day, when Saint Genevieve was seven years old, two bishops, Saints Germanus and Lupus, stopped in Nanterre on their way to Britain.[2] As they approached the church, the people flocked to greet them and receive a blessing. Saint Germanus, knowing through the Holy Spirit of the piety of Saint Genevieve, requested that she be brought to him and asked her name. The bystanders then called her parents, and he prophesied to them saying, "Blessed are the parents of such a wonderful daughter. She will be great before the Lord and convert many people from their evil ways, and will bring many virgins to consecrate themselves to God, by her great example of piety."

Then he said, "Genevieve, my daughter, tell me. Do you desire to dedicate yourself, pure and undefiled, to Christ as His bride?"

With a joyful smile she replied, "Holy master, you have spoken exactly the desire of my heart. I pray that God will grant it to me."

Then Saint Germanus led her to the church where he prayed, holding his hand on her head throughout the entire vespers. Afterward he requested that Severus return with the child at dawn, before his departure to Britain.

Early the next morning, the saint's father brought Genevieve to the church to receive the bishop's final blessing before his departure.

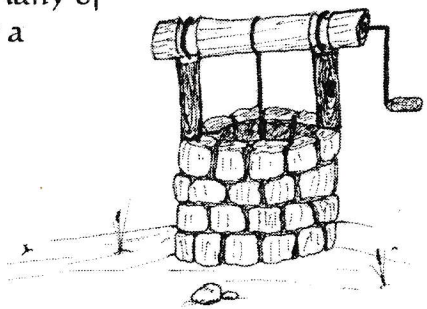
Saint Germanus greeted the girl, "Rejoice, my daughter Genevieve! Do you remember your promise of yesterday, to keep yourself pure?"

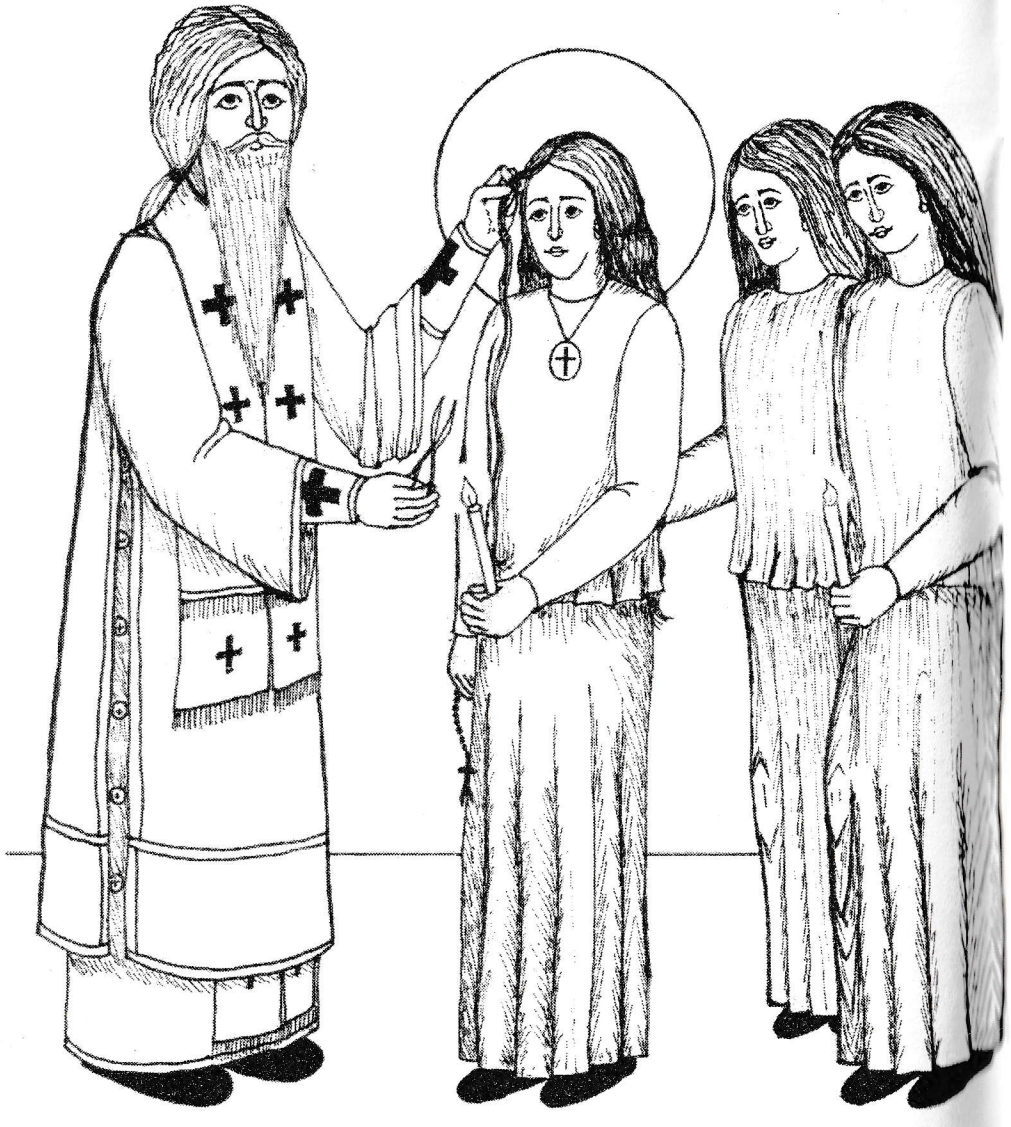
"I remember, holy master," she replied, "that I promised you and God to keep my mind and body pure to the end of my life."

By God's providence, a copper coin with the Cross engraved on it had fallen in the path. The bishop picked it up, and gave it to her saying, "Wear this about your neck in remembrance of the promise you made before me. And do not let other ornaments, neither gold, nor silver, nor stone, adorn your neck or fingers." At the same time, he asked that she remember him often before God.

Not long after this, Gerontia was preparing to go to church for a feast-day celebration and she ordered Saint Genevieve to stay home. However, the maiden began to weep, saying, "With God's help, I will keep the vow that I made to the bishop and will frequent the church so that I may become the bride of Christ." At this, her mother became angry with her and boxed her ears. God's judgment immediately visited Gerontia, and she lost her eyesight.

This blindness persisted for almost two years, until Gerontia remembered the bishop's prophecies concerning her daughter. With faith, she sent her daughter to get water from the local well. Saint Genevieve went to the well and began to weep, because she felt responsible for her mother's blindness. Sighing, she made the sign of the cross over the bucket of water, and returned home. After her mother rinsed her eyes several times with this water, she fully regained her vision. Due to this miracle, the townsfolk considered that well to be blessed by Saint Genevieve, and would go to it for healing. Many of them already considered her a chosen vessel of God.





At the age of fifteen, Saint Genevieve went to Paris to be tonsured a nun.[3] She was presented to the Bishop of Paris with two other virgins who were both much older than she was. They were to be tonsured in the order of their ages, from oldest to youngest. However, the bishop tonsured Saint Genevieve first, for he said, "She who has come last will be first, for she has already achieved consecration in heaven." From that time forth, she generally ate only twice a week, and then she ate only barley bread and a few beans.[4]

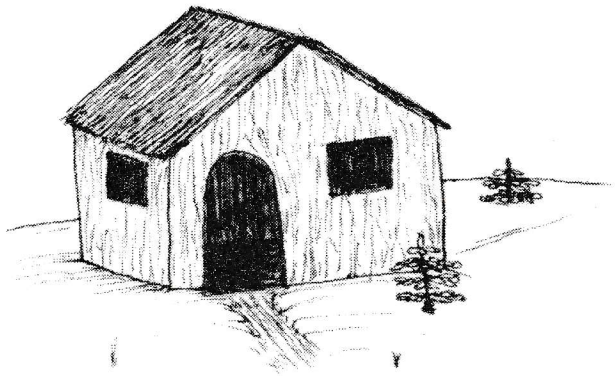
Soon after the holy one's tonsure, Severus and Gerontia reposed. Saint Genevieve then went to live in Paris with her godmother, Lutetia. Because of her intense labors and struggles for the Lord's sake, she soon received the gifts of clairvoyance[5] and wonderworking. Soon other women who wished to dedicate themselves to God began to come to her for instruction and to pray with her.

The enemy of our souls was envious of Saint Genevieve's good fame and the strength that she provided for the faithful. God permitted her to undergo some severe trials to purify her soul. Soon after her parents reposed, she became paralyzed and could not move at all. She lay almost lifeless for three days.

While she was in this state, an angel led her spirit to heaven and showed her all the rewards prepared for the righteous. After this vision, she often wept during prayer because she was still on earth and separated from God.

Yet another trial awaited her, this time through the ill will of the people. The next time Saint Germanus passed through Paris,[6] the people tried to convince him that Saint Genevieve was not as virtuous as he had thought. He responded by publicly greeting her with great warmth and visible reverence.

He brought the townspeople to her hut, and revealed to them how she turned the ground to mud with her tears during prayer. He also told them about her sanctity as a young child. They repented and came to regard Saint Genevieve as a great intercessor before God. Some began to bring their troubles and illnesses to her, asking for her prayers, which she always bestowed.



When Saint Genevieve was 26 years old, Saint Germanus reposed in Ravenna, Italy.[7] On his deathbed, he related wondrous things about Saint Genevieve to his archdeacon, Sedulius. He told Sedulius about her heroic struggles in fasting and prayer, and how she was truly a servant of the Most High God, from her mother's womb. The bishop then gave Sedulius a basket of blessed bread to give to the saint the next time he saw her. The old man knew that this bread and his praise would one day save her from death.

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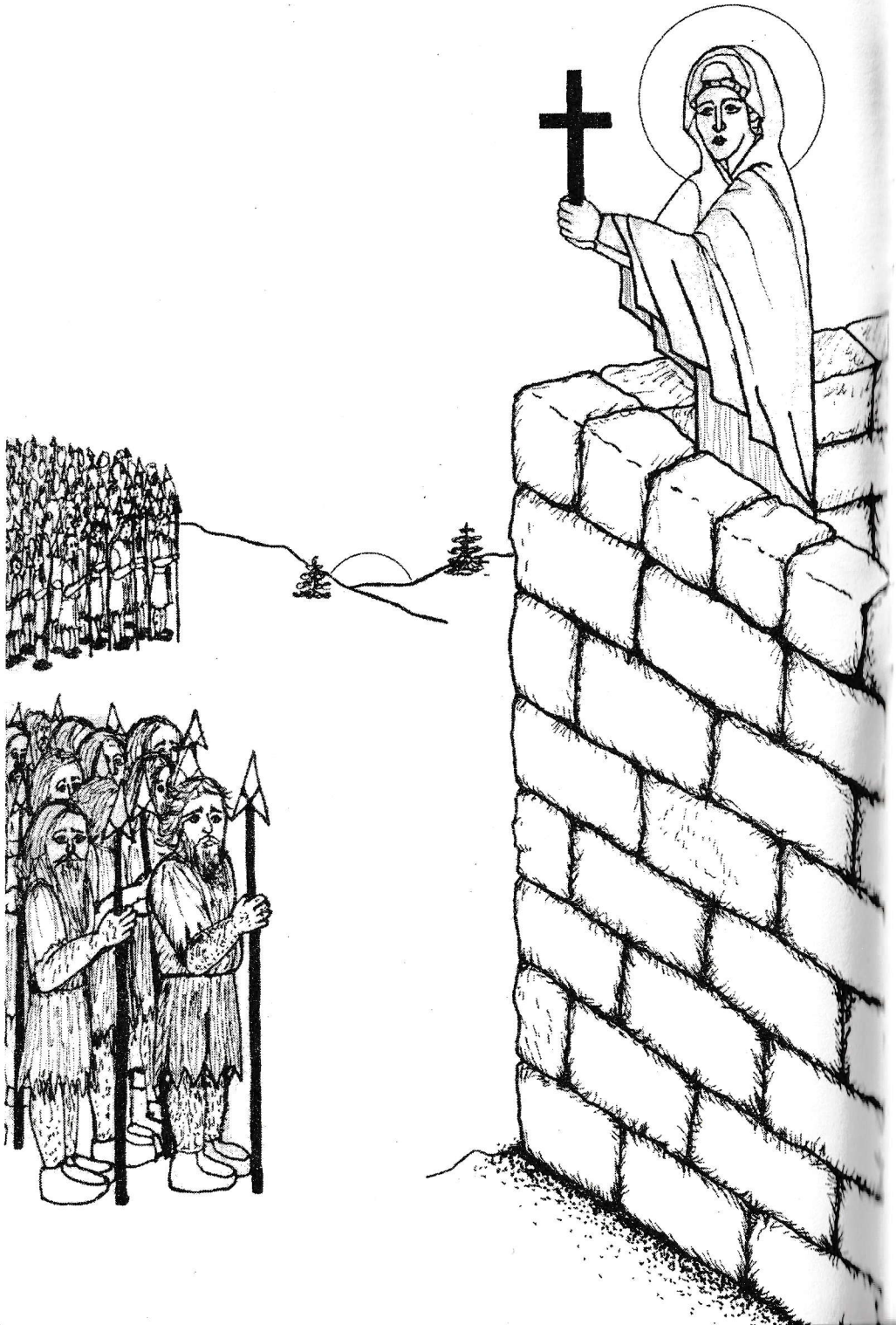
A few years later, Attila the Hun[8] ravaged Europe with his terrifying army of Huns, bringing destruction to all the cities in his path. When he decided to march on Paris, the terrified inhabitants wanted to remove all their belongings to nearby cities, and flee.

Saint Genevieve gathered the women, admonishing them to fast and pray, placing their trust in God. Persuaded, they labored in the church day and night. She also convinced the men of Paris to leave their goods within the city, because the cities to which they were going to move them would be destroyed. She tried to comfort them saying, "God will protect us; we must trust in Him."



However, the people of Paris were again stirred up against the holy maiden. They declared that she was a false prophetess who was preventing them from moving their belongings to safety. They were prepared to either stone her or drown her in the Seine River. Deacon Sedulius arrived just in time. Pushing his way through the crowd, he reminded them of Saint Germanus' respect for the saint. He then presented her with the blessed bread. At this, the crowd repented and dispersed.

Early the next morning, Saint Genevieve again gathered the women around her, and led them up on the walls of the city, which was now surrounded by the Huns' glittering spears. There they prayed to the Lord for deliverance. That very night, Attila's army left for no apparent reason and the city was saved.[9] Saint Genevieve was truly the protectress of Paris, beloved by the inhabitants and respected even by the enemy. Many people began coming to her for advice and healing of both soul and body.

Saint Genevieve had a special love and veneration for Saint Dionysius,[10] who had been the first bishop, martyr, and protector of Paris. She wished to build a church in his honor to house his holy relics, but she lacked the funds to do so.

One day, when some of the city priests visited her, she begged them, "Holy fathers, I implore you, take up a collection to build a church for Saint Dionysius."

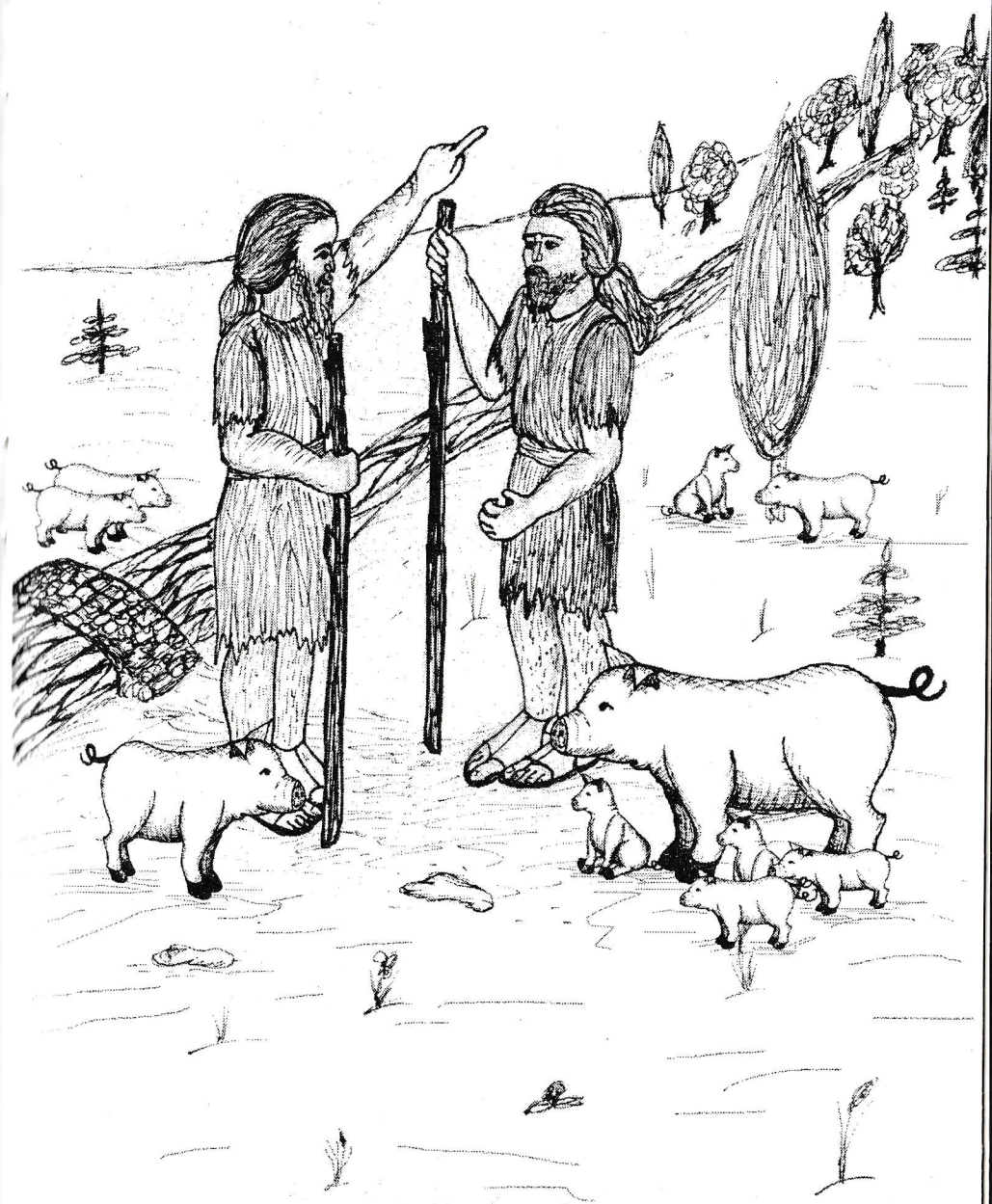
But they answered, "Our village is too poor. We do not even have a lime kiln to make the bricks with."

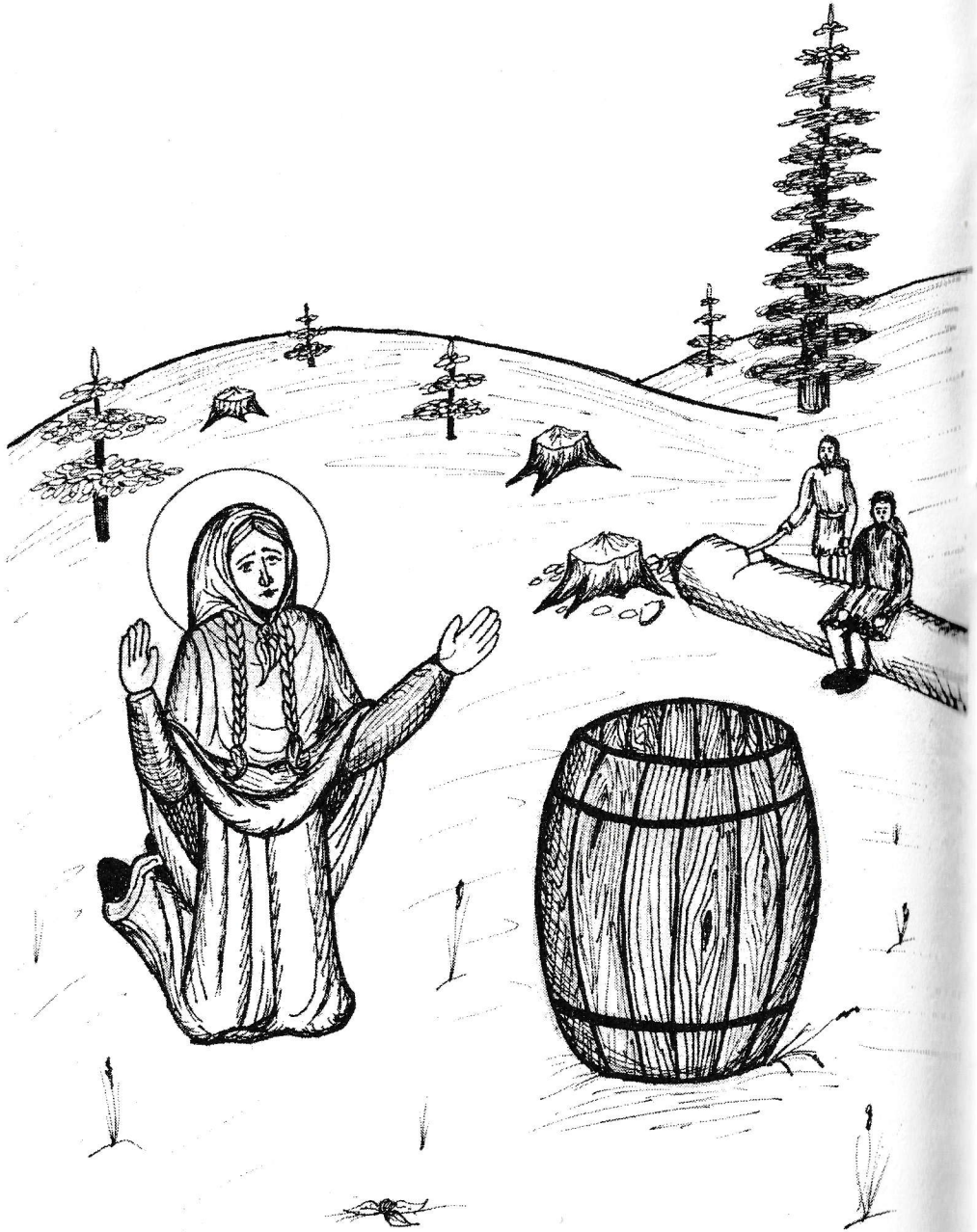
Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Saint Genevieve said, "May it please your holinesses to cross the city bridge; then return and tell me what you hear."

Crossing the bridge, the priests heard two swine herders conversing.

The first said, "I was following one of my pigs the other day and he lead me into the forest to a large lime kiln."

"What a coincidence," replied the second. "I came upon a tree in the forest uprooted by the wind, and under its roots was another kiln in good repair."

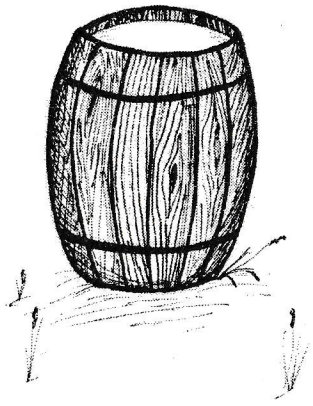




In hearing this, the priests were filled with fear. They followed the swine-herders' directions, and found the two kilns. Then they returned, praising God, and told the saint what they had heard. She gave thanks to God saying, "Blessed be the Lord, who sends His help in every time of need." She spent the night in vigil, begging with tears for God's assistance in building the church.

The next day, she asked a certain Father Genesius to oversee the project, telling him how God had provided the kilns. In awe, he agreed, and many of the citizens also volunteered their time because of this miracle.

One day, as they were working in the forest, they ran out of drink. The priest asked Saint Genevieve to encourage the workers while he went to town to replenish their supply. Hearing this, she asked that he bring her the container that had held the drink. Falling on her knees, she prayed with tears for a short while. When she finished, the vessel was filled to the top, so the workers could continue. They all gave thanks to God for this miracle!



Saint Genevieve loved the holy services and considered the Saturday all-night vigil to be especially important. For she said, "It is a likeness of how our whole lives should be. We must keep vigil in prayer and fasting so the Lord will find us thus when He comes."

One stormy night, the saint set out for the church of Saint Dionysius with a group of virgins. A sudden gust of wind extinguished the only candle they were carrying. Left in total darkness in the middle of the raging storm, the sisters became frightened. They needed the light to safely travel the winding muddy road. Assuring the sisters that it was just a temptation of the devil, the saint asked for the candle and signed it with the sign of the cross. Immediately the candle burst into flame. The sisters proceeded unhindered to the church, giving thanks to God for the miracle. For this reason, Saint Genevieve is often represented in icons with a candle, sometimes with the devil trying to blow it out.

Often, the candle in her cell would light of its own accord when she touched it. Fragments of these candles healed many sick people who obtained them with faith.

During the course of her life, the saint traveled through France, visiting many towns including Meaux, Loan, Orléans, and Tours, where she visited the shrine of the great wonder worker Saint Martin of Tours.[11] Her holiness was so great that even the famed wonder worker Saint Simeon the Stylite[12] in far-off Asia Minor asked to be remembered in her prayers. Wherever she went, God's grace showed forth from her, strengthening the faithful through prophecies and miracles.

On one of her trips, as she approached Loan, many people came out to meet her. Among them were the parents of a girl who had been paralyzed for nine years. The crowd persuaded Saint Genevieve to go to the girl's house. When she arrived, she prayed, touched the girl's limbs, and raised her from her bed. Then they went directly to the church, where the people praised God Who gives such grace to those who love Him. When she left Loan, the people accompanied her, chanting psalms and hymns.

Wherever she went, she performed miracles, cast out demons, and healed the sick. At one time, twelve people of Paris, who were possessed and sorely afflicted by demons, were presented to her. Saint Genevieve prayed, asking Christ to heal them. Suddenly, the possessed people were lifted into the air, touching neither the earth nor the ceiling. Upon the completion of her prayer, she ordered them to go to the church of Saint Dionysius, but they cried out that they could not walk unless she loosed them. By the power of the sign of the cross, they were subdued, and walked to the church in silence.

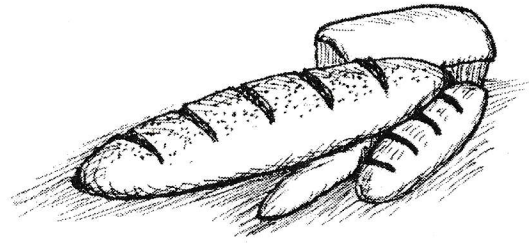
When the saint arrived at the church, she prostrated herself in prayer, and the possessed shouted that the saints whom she was entreating to come were already there. Saint Genevieve arose and signed each of the possessed with the sign of the cross. At this, the demons left them, filling the air with a foul stench. All gave thanks to God that the afflicted had been healed.

Some time after that, the saint was with one of the women who had been cured of demonic illness by her prayers. This woman had a four-year-old son, who accidentally fell into a well and lay submerged for three hours until he was discovered. The weeping mother retrieved her dead child, and laid him with a pleading countenance at the feet of Saint Genevieve.

The saint took the child to her cell and covered him with her cloak. She prostrated herself, praying with tears until God granted that his life return. This occurred during Lent, and the boy was still a catechumen, so when he was baptized on the eve of Pascha, he was named Cellomerus since he had regained his life in Saint Genevieve's cell.

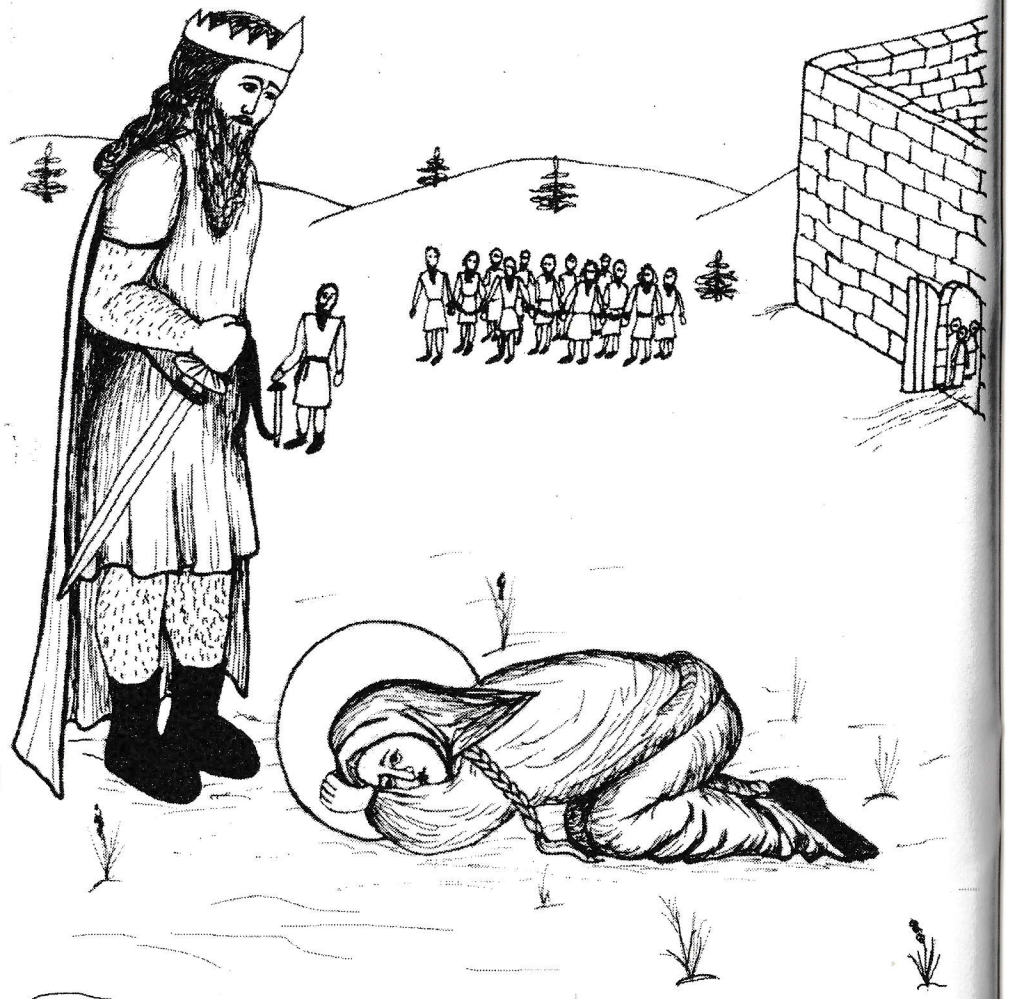
In her late fifties, the saint again saved the citizens of Paris from destruction. For many years, the city had been besieged by the Franks, led by King Childeric.[13] Because of these blockades and a local famine, the citizens began to starve. Placing her trust in God, Saint Genevieve arranged for a fleet of eleven ships to travel to Arcis-sur-Aube, Troyes, and the Champagne region to gather food and supplies. During the trip, she twice saved the boats from sinking: the first time in the rapids and the second time in a violent storm.

She managed to return to Paris in the midst of the war with eleven boatloads of grain in time to save the people from starvation. Upon her return, she distributed the grain to all according to their needs, especially to those near death from hunger. Daily, she would bake many loaves of bread. When the girls who served her went to get the bread, often much of it would be gone, for the saint had already distributed it to the poor. Thus, Saint Genevieve is often depicted in icons carrying a loaf of bread.



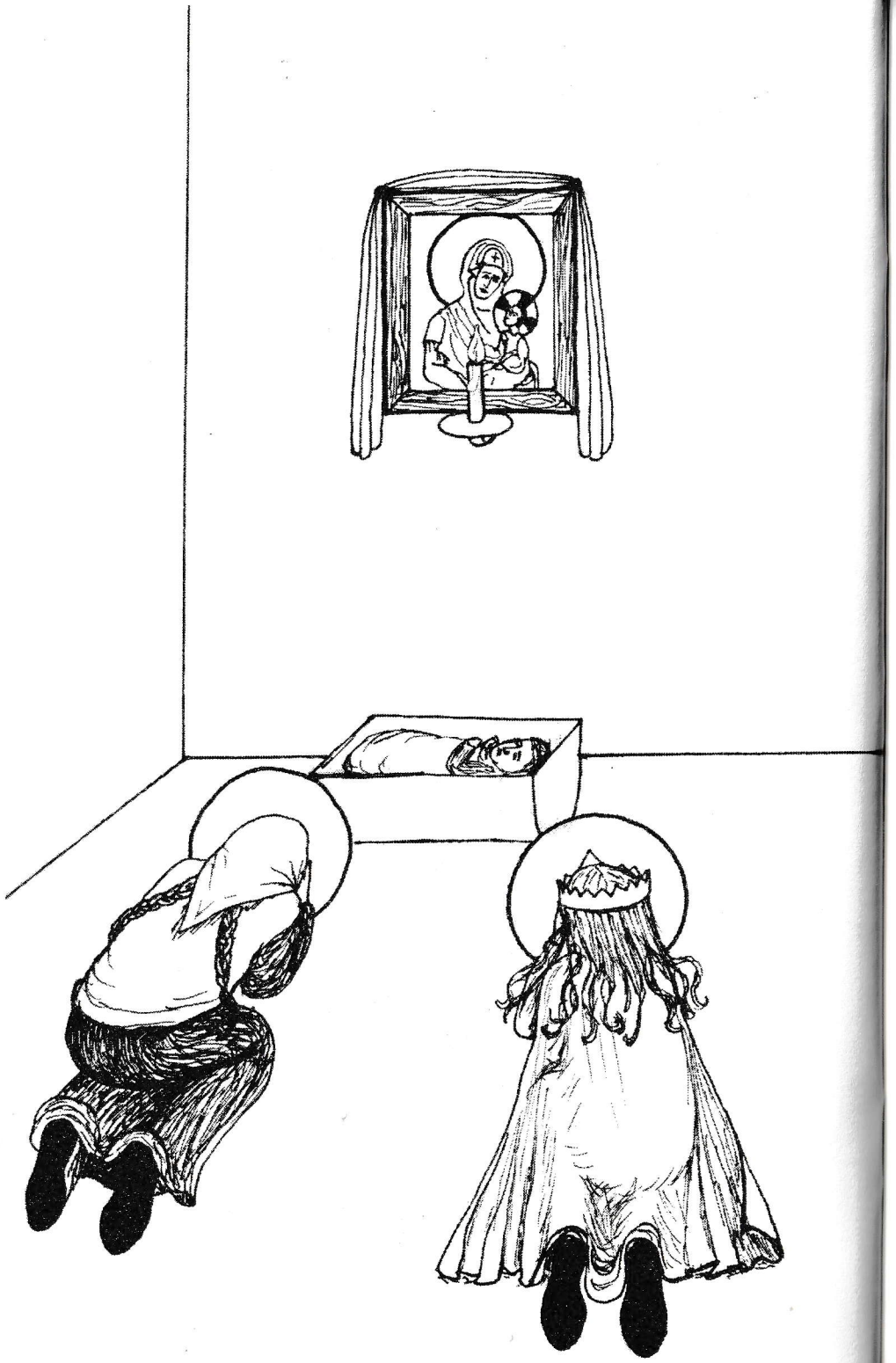
The siege ended in victory for Childeric. In admiration of her courage, the pagan king asked what he might do for her. She replied, "Release your prisoners. Their only crime was that they loved their city." He not only granted this request, but also listened to her every entreaty throughout his entire reign.

At one time, Childeric was about to behead a large number of prisoners of war outside the city. He did not want Saint Genevieve to find out and intercede for them, so he secretly ordered that the city gates be locked and sealed so that she could not follow. When Saint Genevieve learned that the blood of so many men was about to be shed, she rushed along the street to the gate, followed by a crowd of curious onlookers. Seeing the gate locked and sealed, the holy one raised her hands to God and signed the gate with the sign of the cross. To the astonishment of all present, the gates swung open.



Having overtaken the king, Saint Genevieve fell prostrate before him, interceding for the lives of the prisoners. She would not cease her weeping until she obtained her request. The pagan conqueror was as helpless as a child before the entreaties of God's handmaid, pardoning and releasing the entire company of prisoners.

All of Paris marveled. They saw the power of her requests before a barbaric and murderous king. How much more powerful her prayers must be before the All-Merciful God!



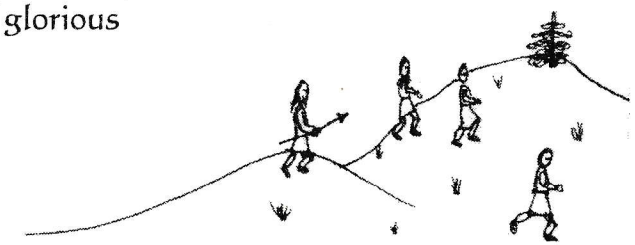
When the saint was 59 years old, King Childeric died, leaving his son, Clovis,[14] to reign in his stead. The young king soon married the Christian princess Clotilda, who was later canonized as a saint.[15]

At the time of the birth of their first son, Ingomer, Clovis was still a pagan. At the entreaties of Saint Clotilda, he allowed the child to be baptized. However, Ingomer died while still in his baptismal robe, causing Clovis to blame his death on the baptism.

When a second son, Chlodomer, was born, Saint Clotilda again convinced Clovis to allow him to be baptized. The baby soon became very sick, which Clovis again ascribed to baptism. However, Saint Genevieve and Saint Clotilda prayed for the infant with many tears and prostrations and he recovered.[16]

Clovis persisted in his paganism until he was converted in a wondrous manner. One day, he was engaged in a battle against the Alemmani, in which his army was being destroyed. His prayers to his heathen gods were of no use. In despair, he began praying to the God of Clotilda and promised to be baptized if he won the battle. Suddenly, the enemy turned and fled, as if routed by an invisible host. When their king was killed, they submitted to Clovis saying "We wish no more people should perish. Now we are thine."

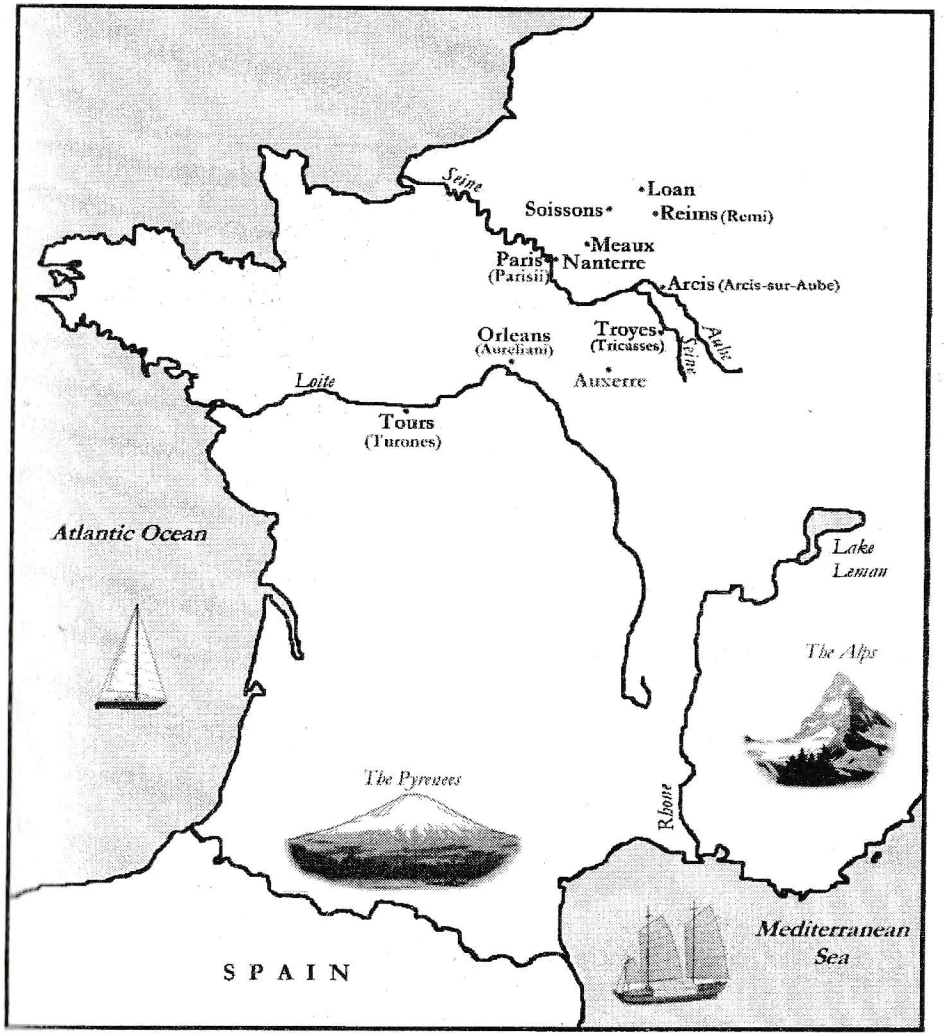
Returning home victorious, the king told Saints Clotilda and Genevieve about the miraculous occurrence. After learning about the Christian faith from Bishop Remigius, Clovis was afraid to convert without his army converting also, so he decided to preach Christianity to his army. But the power of God went before him, and when he arrived, before he could speak, the people cried out together, "We cast off mortal gods, O righteous king, and we are ready to follow the God whom Remigius tells us is immortal." He and more than 3,000 of his soldiers were baptized on that glorious day!



At the suggestion of Saint Genevieve, Clovis began to build a church, to be dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. However, at the young age of 45, he reposed, before the completion of the building.[17] Saint Genevieve reposed just one year later at the age of 89, on January 3, 512. She was buried in the church of Saints Peter and Paul after its completion. The temple became known as the Church of Saint Genevieve, because of the countless miracles she worked when people in tribulations called upon her for help.

Saint Genevieve soon came to be regarded as the Patron Saint of Paris. She is likewise the patron and namesake of many Orthodox women today.

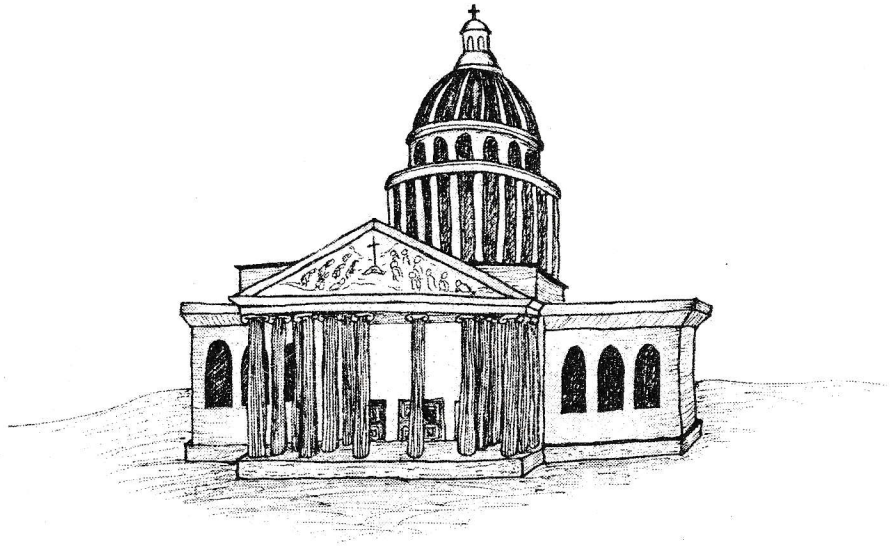
A Map of Ancient Gaul



Afterword

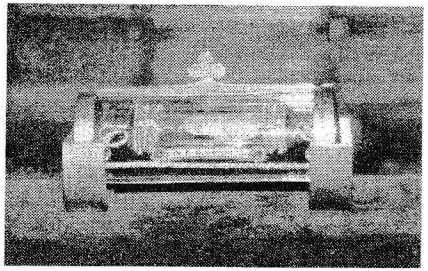
After her repose, Saint Genevieve continued to work many miracles in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. These miracles made the church famous all over France, so much so that the church became known as the church of *Sainte Geneviéve*. Royalty and commoners alike enriched it with their gifts. She continued to cast out demons and heal infirmities. One young man had such a severe case of kidney stones that his parents despaired of his life. At Saint Genevieve's tomb, they wept and prayed fervently for the healing of their son. That very day, the stones passed, and he was never troubled by them again.

In 847, the church was plundered by the Normans, and then rebuilt, but it was not completed until 1177. Later, the original church fell into decay. King Louis XV, who had been saved from a deadly illness at



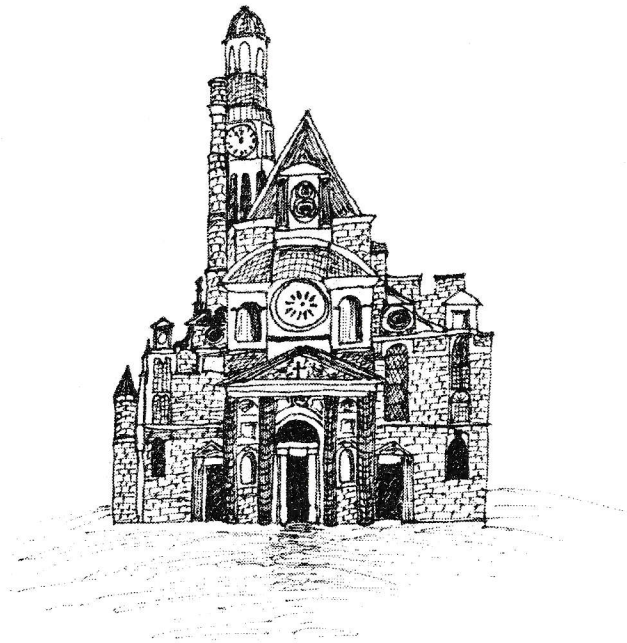
Saint Genevieve's intercession, came to thank her for the cure, and began construction of another church in 1764. However, the French Revolution broke out before it was dedicated. The revolutionaries took the church over in 1791, and destroyed most of her relics by burning them in 1793. The church was renamed the Pantheon and became a national mausoleum and burial place for famous Frenchmen.

Although the Pantheon was restored as a church in 1821, it was converted back into a mausoleum in 1831. An effort was made to restore it as a church again in 1852. However, in 1885, the church was once again became a mausoleum and has remained in that state. Despite this fact, frescos of her life still decorate the walls to this day.



At this time, Saint Genevieve's tomb and part of her hand (pictured on the right, courtesy of Euphemia Briere) are located at the church of *Sainte Etienne de Monte* (Saint Stephen of the Hill) in Paris.

Not only did Saint Genevieve work miracles for faithful individuals; she also protected the city from invasion and natural disaster. In the year 834, Saint Genevieve saved the city of Paris from total inundation. She also worked a marvelous miracle when she stopped the violent plague of *mal des ardents* (the burning fever). This plague killed more than 14,000, but stopped suddenly in Paris when her relics were brought in procession around the city. All that looked upon or touched her relics were healed. In all of Paris, only three people died from the plague. She continues to protect the city and the faithful to this day. Holy Saint Genevieve, pray unto God for us!



Endnotes

1 Saint Genevieve's parents were from the upper class of the Romanized native Gallic people, who were the victims of the conquering Franks, pagan Germanic invaders.

2 Saint Germanus of Auxerre and Saint Lupus of Troyes were traveling in 429 AD to Britain to fight the Pelagian heresy. This heresy stated that people are saved by their own efforts, and not by divine grace. It also denies the need for baptism. According to some sources, Saint Patrick of Ireland was also with the two French saints.

Saint Germanus was born into a noble family and through marriage and his brilliant talents, was made a duke and entrusted with governing the Gallic provinces. However, through a certain turn of events, he was forcibly tonsured by Saint Amator. He accepted this as Divine will, and gave himself up to prayer and virtues. Eventually, he was unanimously elected to become bishop when the ruling bishop, Saint Amator, reposed. During his bishopric, Saint Germanus built monasteries, established schools, defeated heresies, and interceded before kings for mercy toward their subjects.

Saint Lupus helped defeat the Pelagian heresy. He also persuaded the cruel invading Huns to spare Troyes and for this was led away as a hostage by the Hunnish leader Attila. He returned to his diocese only after many years of exile.

Saint Patrick was born in England, but at the age of 16 he was carried off to Ireland where he was the slave of a druid high priest and watched his master's flock for six years. He then escaped to Britain and placed himself under the guidance of Saint Germanus. In his late forties, he returned to Ireland and with many miracles and brilliant teachings he converted the entire country to Christianity.

3 In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, a person is dedicated to God by being tonsured. During the tonsure, hair is shorn from the front, back, and two sides of the head of the person, so as to form a cross. As the hair is cut, the bishop or priest says, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

4 She continued this diet until the age of 50, when the bishop gave her an obedience to add a little fish and milk. Then she changed her diet, for obedience is more beloved by God than asceticism.

5 Clairvoyance: the power to discern what is beyond the range of human senses, through the Holy Spirit.

6 He had been called to Britain again, to silence the Pelagian heresy once and for all, this time in 444. At the time, Saint Genevieve was 22.

7 Saint Germanus, also know as Saint Germain, had traveled to Ravenna, Italy, in the year 448 to ask pardon from punishment for the Armoricans, who had been in rebellion. Their pardon was granted. While still in Ravenna, on July 31, 448, the saint reposed in the Lord at about the age of 68. His body were brought back to Auxerre for burial.

8 This was Attila the Second. This attack happened in 451, while the Visogoths were in control of Paris. In 450, the Romans had decided to stop paying tribute to Attila, so he went on the warpath against Italy and Gaul, pillaging and destroying everything in his path.

9 Attila turned south to Orléans, leaving Paris as the only untouched city in his path. At Chalôns, near Orléans, he was defeated by the allied armies of the Roman general Aetius and Theodoric, king of the Goths. Attila died of drunkenness in 453, on the night of his wedding celebration.

10 Saint Dionysius was born in Italy and in 250 AD was sent to Gaul (present day France) as a missionary together with six other bishops. He became the first Bishop of Paris and was so effective in converting the inhabitants of that land, that he was arrested and imprisoned along with his priest, Saint Rusticus, and his deacon, Saint Eleutherius. The three were beheaded on October 9th on Montmartre (Martyrs' Hill) near Paris under the persecution of the Roman Emperor Decius. Their bodies were rescued from the Seine River and

Saint Genevieve later built a chapel over their relics. This chapel was later expanded to a monastery by King Dagobert in 629 AD.

11 Saint Martin of Tours was converted to Christianity while in the Roman army, and because of this begged to be allowed to leave the army to live in solitude. He lived this way for about ten years, with many other monastics gathering around him. He often traveled to preach in parts of Gaul (present day France) where the light of Christianity had not yet reached. As more and more of the people became converted, they wanted to consecrate Martin as the Bishop of Tours. He refused, but they tricked him into coming to the city by telling him that a dying person there needed his prayers. When he arrived, they consecrated him bishop. He worked countless miracles both during his lifetime and after his repose, and is known as the Enlightener of Gaul.

12 Saint Simeon the Stylite was living in Asia Minor. He had become a monk at the age of 18, and mortified his flesh by fasting and by tying ropes around his body. He also chained himself to one spot, first with a chain, and later by his will power. Because of his sanctity, people began to come to him for enlightenment, so he built a pillar on which he could still instruct the faithful, but could also have some solitude. Through torrid summers and frigid winters he remained on the pillar through old age, becoming a wonder-worker famed among the pilgrims who flocked to visit him.

13 The siege may have happened around 476, lasting for almost ten years according to some sources. Saint Genevieve's excursion was probably in about 480.

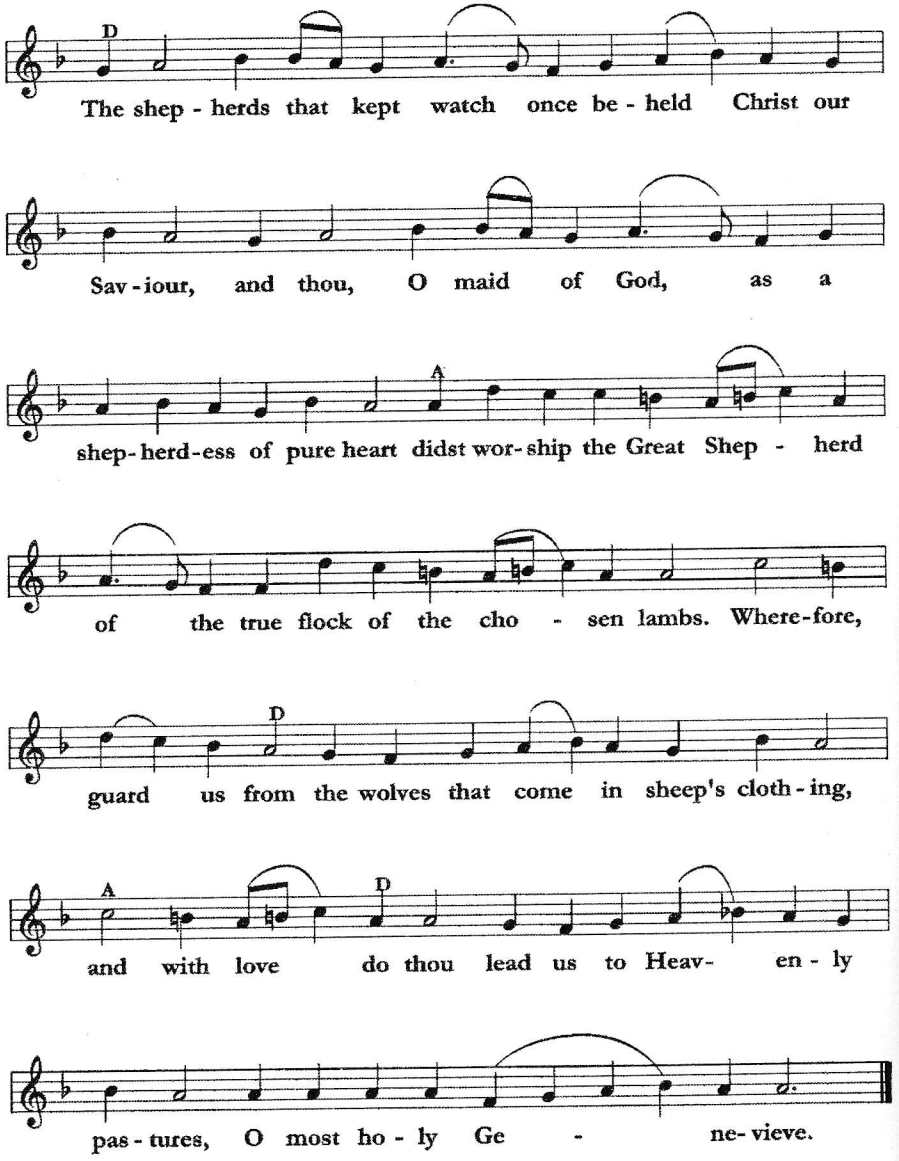
14 Clovis became king at the age of 16 and began at once to unify all of Gaul under his power. He also had great respect for Saint Genevieve and listened to her advice.

15 Saint Clotilda was the daughter of a Burgundian king. Her uncles had plotted to kill her father, so she and her sister fled south to Paris where she married King Clovis in 493. In 496, King Clovis killed the Roman representative, Syragrius, in Soissons, officially ending the Roman governance in Gaul. About this same time Clovis moved the capital of France to Paris.

16 Saint Clotilda bore four sons and a daughter for Clovis. The first son died, and the other three, Clodomir, Childebert, and Clotaire became kings.

17 Saint Clotilda was left to finish the church, and had Clovis buried there. She had the grief of seeing her oldest son perish in a war with the Burgundians. She took her three young grandsons, Theodoald, Gunther, and Clodoald (also known as Cloud), under her care. However, Childebert and Clotaire, her two remaining sons wanted the throne to themselves. They withdrew the children from the care of their mother by means of a ruse. They slew the two eldest, but the youngest, Saint Cloud, escaped and entered a monastery. At this, Saint Clotilda withdrew from Paris to Tours, near the tomb of Saint Martin of Tours, where she remained for the rest of her life. At one time, her two remaining sons got into a quarrel and Clotaire and his army were being pursued by Childebert and his allies. Saint Clotilda prayed before the tomb of Saint Martin throughout the night, not to permit another fratricide in her family. As a result, a frightful tempest arose, and prevented the battle. She lived for 34 years as a widow, and reposed on June 3, 545.

The Dismissal Hymn
for Saint Genevieve
First Tone


D
The shep - herds that kept watch once be - held Christ our
Sav - iour, and thou, O maid of God, as a
A
shep - herd - ess of pure heart didst wor - ship the Great Shep - herd
of the true flock of the cho - sen lambs. Where - fore,
D
guard us from the wolves that come in sheep's cloth - ing,
A
D
and with love do thou lead us to Heav - en - ly
pas - tures, O most ho - ly Ge - ne - vieve.

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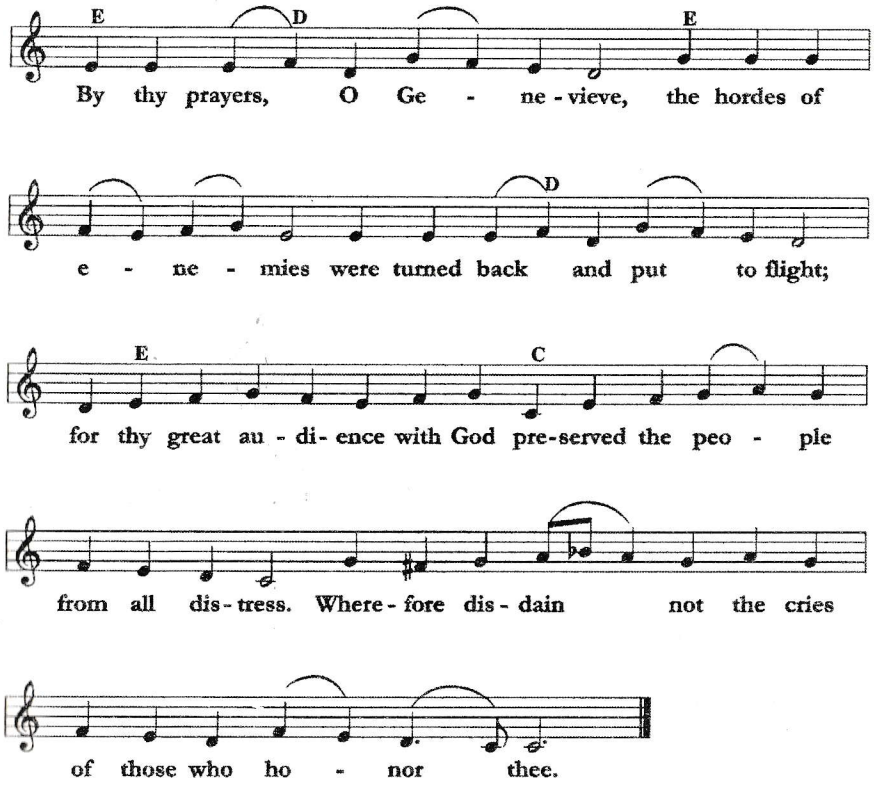
The Kontakion
for Saint Genevieve
Fourth Tone


E
D
E
By thy prayers, O Ge - ne - vieve, the hordes of
D
e - ne - mies were turned back and put to flight;
E
C
for thy great au - di - ence with God pre - served the peo - ple
from all dis - tress. Where - fore dis - dain not the cries
of those who ho - nor thee.

Megalynarion of Saint Genevieve

Charity and love for thy fellow man / filled thy heart to brimming, / and transfigured thy blessed soul; / for the Lord was with thee / in mighty deeds and wonders, / O Genevieve, most hallowed handmaid of Christ our God.

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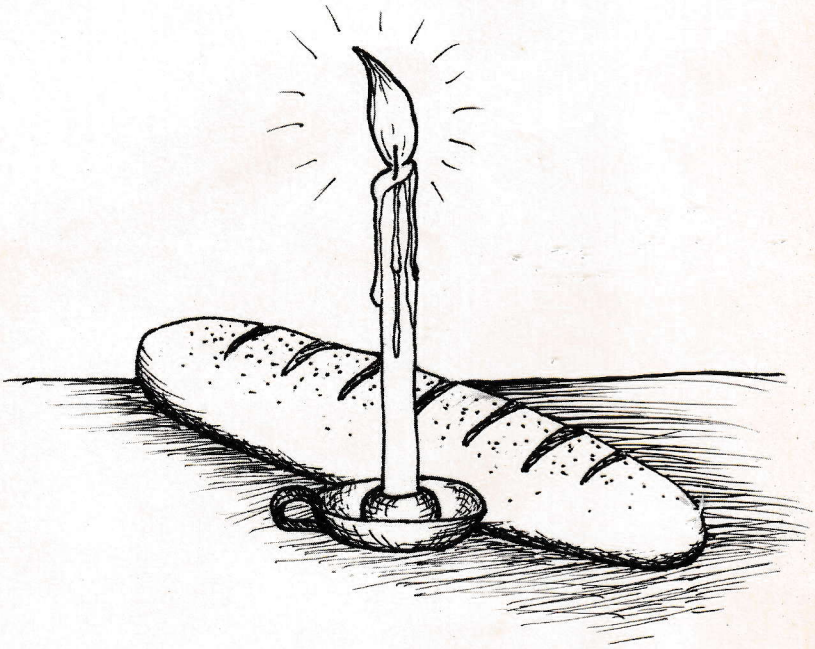

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